



“The Prostitution Problem”: Insights from Senegal

Ellen E. Foley¹

Received: 27 October 2018 / Accepted: 29 November 2018 / Published online: 14 December 2018
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2018

In their Target Article, Benoit, Smith, Jansson, Healey, and Magnuson (2018) offer a welcome contribution to the polarized realm of academic debate about “the prostitution problem.” In their measured and thorough review, Benoit et al. examine the conceptual underpinnings of the two main views of prostitution (e.g., the gender inequality perspective and the social inequality perspective). Benoit et al. demonstrate how these distinct understandings of sex work shape research agendas. Most importantly, they interrogate these paradigms by conducting an empirical evaluation of their policy applications and outcomes. The article thereby moves beyond the theoretical debates by examining whether these policies achieve their objectives. In light of the available evidence, Benoit et al. conclude that integrative approaches that address multiple social inequalities are most effective at mitigating the social exclusion of sex workers.

I am an anthropologist whose research fits within the social inequality paradigm. This was not always the case. As a student, I came under the tutelage of an “anti-sex feminist” who taught Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. I was primed to view the realm of prostitution through the lens of gender exploitation. Patriarchy, male domination, and female subservience operated as the explanatory frameworks for sexual harassment, gender violence, marital rape, pornography, and, of course, prostitution. My break with this perspective came about in the course of conducting ethnographic research on sex, economic precarity, and gender relations in Senegal. The assertion that prostitution is a form of sexual slavery in which women have no agency could not explain the patterns I was observing (Barry, 1979). Even more crucial for an anthropologist, this framework did not correspond to women’s experiences. Here, I highlight findings from my research, from the

discipline of anthropology, and from studies of gender and sexuality in Africa that echo the authors’ arguments.

A Challenging Unit of Analysis

Benoit et al. (2018) point out that it is difficult to know exactly what is being examined in studies of prostitution. A range of largely imprecise concepts abound in the social science literature (e.g., sex industry, sex trade, sexual exploitation, street prostitution, trafficking, pimping, escort services, and exotic dancing). Commercial exchanges range from the seemingly mild (non-sexual cuddling) to more violent and dangerous acts. In the absence of robust empirical data about this astoundingly heterogeneous sector, one archetypical image has come to dominate: the female drug user (often assumed to be a survivor of sexual abuse) who has fallen prey to a pimp and engages in street prostitution in exchange for drugs and protection. This may in fact be an accurate depiction of some women who sell sex on the street. What is problematic is that this image of extreme vulnerability and exploitation is often employed by anti-trafficking and anti-sexual slavery crusaders to represent all forms of commercial sexual exchange (Weitzer, 2007).

Following anthropologist Laura Agustin, Benoit et al. (2018) urge caution about drawing universal conclusions from understandings of sex work in any particular location (Agustin, 2007). Indeed, many registered sex workers in Senegal would be surprised to learn that would-be advocates in the Global North view them as victims, trafficked women, or sexual slaves. While some women may sell sex in brothels or hourly hotels where they depend on venue owners for protection from police raids or violent clients, pimping is unheard of. Senegalese sex workers find clients in bars, night clubs, rest stops, open-air spaces, and at public beaches. Many sexual transactions are one-time affairs, yet some clients become regulars who contact women using text messages or phone calls. Some women sell sex only rarely (once every several weeks or more), while others operate on a weekly work schedule in which they “go out” for four or five regular shifts. Experienced sex workers are strategic about the venues where they work, the clients they

This Commentary refers to the article available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1276-6>.

✉ Ellen E. Foley
efoley@clarku.edu

¹ International Development, Community, and Environment, Clark University, Worcester, MA 01610, USA

accept, and the services they provide. Some women's social lives and social networks revolve around the "milieu" and they spend much of their leisure time with other sex workers and in venues where sex is sold. Others may be married and living in multi-generational households where their domestic lives resemble those of non-sex workers and their commercial sexual encounters pass unnoticed (ENDA-Sante, 2007; Foley, 2016; Foley & Drame, 2013; Foley & Nguer, 2010). This diversity of experience is not unique to Senegal. Feminist and sex worker activists in other African countries are also working to dispel universal narratives of the exploited and trafficked African prostitute and to contextualize sex work, gender, and sexuality in African settings (Nyong'o, 2010).

I offer this brief sketch not to argue that all sex workers in Senegal are fully autonomous agents who choose to practice sex work free from social or economic constraints. Many sex workers lament their lack of other viable economic options and report that they would gladly pursue other livelihoods if they were as lucrative as sex work. Yet to call these women victims whose self-perceptions are delusions strikes me as a hasty dismissal. Anthropological common sense suggests that women who practice sex work have particularly valuable expertise to offer about opportunities, dilemmas, and constraints inherent to sex work. To be sure, narratives of lived experience do not produce unmediated accounts of objective truth. Yet I maintain an anthropological skepticism of a priori definitions of sex work as a universal social phenomenon and the systematic discounting of narrated experience as false consciousness.

What Can We Learn from Africa?

The explosion of scholarship on sexual exchange in African societies since the advent of AIDS offers a useful counterpoint to the assertion of universal definitions of prostitution, trafficking, and sexual exploitation. Debates continue about the blurred boundaries between commercial sex work, the realm of exchange that has come to be known as transactional sex, and the intimate and economic exchanges that constitute courtship and marital relationships (Cole, 2010; Foley & Drame, 2013; Hunter, 2002; Masvawure, 2010; Stoebenau, Heise, Wamoyi, & Bobrova, 2016). In a recent meta-analysis of the existing scholarship on transactional sex, Stoebenau et al. suggest that the main distinction between transactional sex and marriage is that marriage is socially sanctioned, carries an expectation of a long-term commitment, and often involves childbearing and rearing. Importantly, this definition does not rest on the absence of characteristics of commercial sex work or transactional sex including instrumentality, economic dependence, or violence. In other words, it is the social sanction of marriage that renders it distinct (and moral). Echoing Benoit et al. (2018), I suspect that sex work is often illegal because it is morally fraught, not because it is inherently or necessarily dangerous.

The complex phenomena of commercial sex and transactional sex in Senegal help us appraise the applicability of the two main theoretical paradigms on prostitution. Are women who sell sex in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, sexually exploited because of hierarchical gender relations, or is their labor exploited as a result of intersecting inequalities under neoliberal capitalism (Benoit et al., 2018)? The answer to both questions is "yes." First, it is important to understand that sex work in Senegal operates in a societal context in which gendered provision (i.e., the flow of financial support and other resources from men to women) is central to heterosexual relationships (Dial, 2008). This social expectation can operate as a disincentive to promoting girls' education beyond primary school or preparing young women for the workforce. Yet the past 40 years of neoliberal economic restructuring have seen a shrinkage in public sector jobs, the collapse of many rural livelihoods, ensuing rural–urban migration, and a constriction of the formal economy (Diop, 2004). Clandestine migration has become a chief economic strategy for young men, and for those left behind, it has become exceedingly difficult to support dependents. Economic precarity is the new norm.

The sex workers whose stories I came to know in Senegal illustrate how frayed social networks and economic precarity operate as the backdrop against which they begin selling sex (Foley, 2016; Foley & Nguer, 2010). In interviews with women who were members of Women First¹ (an NGO that aims to reduce women's social and economic vulnerability), women often pointed to a triggering social event as they recounted their entry into sex work (Foley, 2016). While many households face economic insecurity, women's stories highlighted how divorce, the death of a spouse, or the death of a parent created economic distress that motivated them to pursue sex work. These women were typically supporting dependent children, dependent parents, or younger siblings with their earnings from sex work. It would be disingenuous to overstate these women's volition to become sex workers, but nearly all of them referred to sex work as the best option in the context of severely constrained agency. Most of the women would have chosen another form of work, but the convergence of limited schooling and no job training posed challenges. Some sex workers began their paid employment as domestic help, but they learned that selling sex was much more lucrative.

Policy Implications: Repressive Policy in Senegal

A key contribution of the Benoit et al. (2018) Target Article is that they follow each theoretical paradigm to its policy applications and then assess the extent that these policies achieve their stated outcomes. Again, Senegal offers a useful example as

¹ Women First is a pseudonym.

the only African nation with a legal framework for regulating sex work and providing essential medical care to women who register as sex workers (Foley, 2016; Foley & Nguer, 2010). Senegal's legal framework fits the restrictive policy category developed by Östergren (2017) and employed by Benoit et al. While selling sex is legal provided that sex workers register and comply with monthly medical screenings, a variety of activities, from solicitation to benefiting from the sale of sexual services (e.g., pimping), are illegal. The wide latitude in judicial and police interpretation of solicitation means that registered sex workers are frequently subject to police harassment. Many women dedicate a portion of their income to bribing police officers to protect themselves from arrest and detention (Foley, 2016). Women report that in spite of registration, they remain vulnerable to verbal and physical violence from both clients and police officers. While technically legal, sex work is highly stigmatized in Senegal and registered sex workers often fear exposure more than violence. Some women avoid registration for this very reason, thereby foregoing access to medical services and social supports (Foley, 2016).

Women who comply with Senegal's registration requirements gain access to medical care in and some cases social services. While Senegal's legislative framework for prostitution emphasizes eliminating disease and public health surveillance of registered women, in the context of HIV/AIDS, there has been an emphasis on reducing sex workers' vulnerability. Registered sex workers undergo regular medical screenings, attend monthly education sessions, receive free condoms, and may receive financial assistance with housing, school fees, and prescription drugs. These are valued resources. Yet, Senegal's registration system at best aims for harm reduction; it is not designed to mitigate social exclusion. Some of the agencies that serve sex workers actually may reinforce and reproduce exclusion by encouraging women to exit sex work (Foley, 2016). A recent quantitative analysis of Senegal's repressive system found that while registration has a positive effect on health, registered sex workers lack social supports and are more likely to experience violence from clients and police than non-registered sex workers (Ito, Lépine, & Treibich, 2018). Perhaps more importantly, the stigma associated with registering means that many women refuse to register and thereby forgo access to medical services. In other words, the repressive policy, which is designed to minimize disease transmission, produces the opposite effect by driving sex workers underground and rendering them harder to reach with educational materials, medical care, and social support.

What Do Sex Workers Want?

In spite of the presence of sex worker movements in Africa and elsewhere (Durbar, based in Calcutta, India is an oft-cited example), there have been few cases where policymakers have

ceded to their demands. While there is clearly a need for continuing research on the outcomes of various policy approaches, Benoit et al. (2018) provide compelling evidence that restrictive and repressive policies are not producing the desired outcomes. As yet another example, a recent study of prostitutes working in France indicates that 42% have experienced more violence in the wake of a 2016 law that penalizes the clients who purchase sex rather than those selling sex (Le Bail, Giametta, & Ras-souw, 2018). If policymakers and advocates are indeed committed to reducing sex workers' vulnerability, it might be time to pay attention to sex workers' ideas about how to improve their rights as workers.

In the Senegalese context, some sex workers would undoubtedly say that what they want most of all is to leave sex work. Policymakers and advocates might then examine the socioeconomic conditions that facilitate entry into sex work and address those social drivers. Perhaps more than anything, sex workers might stress that they are dedicated caregivers and family members, and it is this very dedication that motivates their actions. In the absence of economic alternatives, Senegalese sex workers would likely advocate for safer working conditions, protection from violence of clients and police, a living wage, affordable housing, and comprehensive health insurance and medical services for themselves and their dependents.² They would certainly demand policies that affirm their honor and social worth. Focusing on promoting the human rights and dignity of sex workers, rather than lamenting the immoral exploitation of the prostituted woman, could be a promising place to begin.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of Clark University and Senegal's national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

² In the course of my research, I have asked sex workers and NGO staff if they could imagine a sex workers rights movement developing in Senegal, as it has in other parts of Africa. The answer, anchored in a keen appreciation of the stigma associated with non-marital sex, was always a resounding "no."

References

- Agustín, L. M. (2007). *Sex at the margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*. London: Zed Books.
- Barry, K. (1979). *Female sexual slavery*. New York: New York University Press.
- Benoit, C., Smith, M., Jansson, M., Healey, P., & Magnuson, D. (2018). “The prostitution problem”: Claims, evidence, and policy outcomes. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1276-6>.
- Cole, J. (2010). *Sex and salvation: Imagining the future in Madagascar*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Dial, F. B. (2008). *Mariage et divorce à Dakar: itinéraires féminins*. Paris: Karthala.
- Diop, M. C. (Ed.). (2004). *Gouverner le Sénégal: Entre ajustement structurel et développement durable*. Paris: Karthala.
- ENDA-Sante. (2007). *Au delà des clichés: La réalité multiforme de la prostitution clandestine au Sénégal (série capitalisation)*. Dakar, Senegal: ENDA-Santé.
- Foley, E. E. (2016). Regulating sex work: Subjectivity and stigma in Senegal. *Culture, Health, and Sexuality*, *19*(1), 50–63.
- Foley, E. E., & Drame, F. M. (2013). *Mbaraan* and the shifting political economy of sex in urban Senegal. *Culture, Health, and Sexuality*, *15*(2), 121–134.
- Foley, E. E., & Nguer, R. (2010). Courting success in HIV/AIDS prevention: The paradoxes of a concentrated epidemic in Senegal. *African Journal of AIDS Research*, *9*(4), 325–336.
- Hunter, M. (2002). The materiality of everyday sex: Thinking beyond “prostitution”. *African Studies*, *61*(1), 99–120.
- Ito, S., Lépine, A., & Treibich, C. (2018). The effect of sex work regulation on health and well-being of sex workers: Evidence from Senegal. *Health Economics*, *27*, 1627–1652.
- Le Bail, H., Giametta, C., & Rassouw, N. (2018). *Que pensent les travailleurs.se.s du sexe de la loi prostitution?* Médecins du Monde, Paris. Retrieved October 15, 2018 from <https://www.medecinsdumonde.org/sites/default/files/Rapport-prostitution-BD.PDF>.
- Masvawure, T. (2010). “I just need to be flashy on campus”: Female students and transactional sex at a university in Zimbabwe. *Culture, Health, and Sexuality*, *12*(8), 857–870.
- Nyong’o, Z. (2010). When I dare to be powerful: On the road to a sexual rights movement in East Africa. Retrieved October 15, 2018 from https://www.oozebap.org/dones/biblio/Sex_Worker.pdf.
- Östergren, P. (2017). From zero-tolerance to full integration: Rethinking prostitution policies. Retrieved November 11, 2018 from <https://www.demandat.eu/publications/zero-tolerance-full-integration-rethinking-prostitution-policies>.
- Stoebenau, K., Heise, L., Wamoyi, J., & Bobrova, N. (2016). Revisiting the understanding of “transactional” sex in sub-Saharan Africa: A review and synthesis of the literature. *Social Science and Medicine*, *168*, 186–197.
- Weitzer, R. (2007). The social construction of sex trafficking: Ideology and the institutionalization of a moral crusade. *Politics and Society*, *35*(3), 447–475.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.